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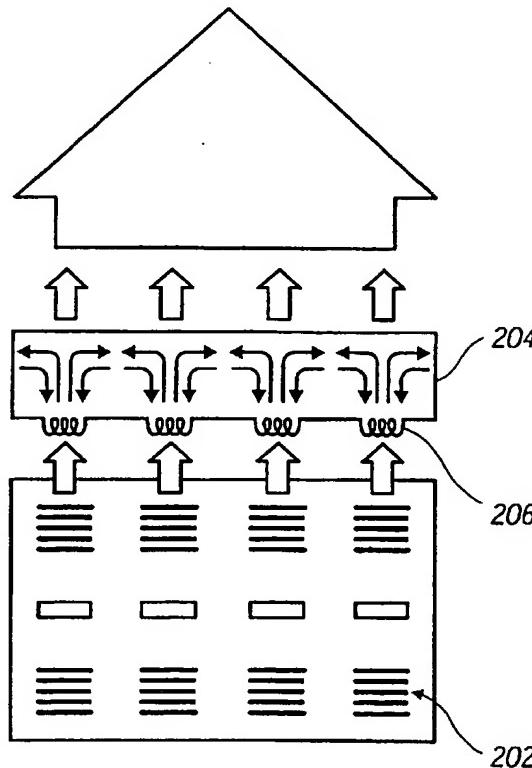
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(54) Title: HIGH-POWERED COHERENT ARRAYS OF VERTICAL CAVITY SURFACE-EMITTING SEMICONDUCTING LASERS

Coherent Light



(57) Abstract: An array of VCSELs (202) is made to operate coherently by coupling light to and from all elements with a common waveguide (204). The common waveguide (204) can be fabricated on the wafer or separately, and allows enough optical power to mix between the individual lasers (202) for phase-locking to occur.

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HIGH-POWERED COHERENT ARRAYS OF VERTICAL CAVITY SURFACE-EMITTING SEMICONDUCTING LASERS

BACKGROUND OF THE INVENTION

1. Background and Summary of the Invention:

The present invention relates to semiconductor laser devices, and more particularly to vertical cavity surface emitting lasers (VCSELs).

Background

VCSELs are important semiconductor laser sources for many applications, including telecommunications. Though VCSELs formed on a chip in arrays are individually coherent, the light from each individual VCSEL is not coherent with respect to the others because their phase and wavelength differ slightly, and are therefore uncorrelated. For such an incoherent array consisting of N elements producing some power P, the on-axis power in the far field is $\sim NP$. However, if the array as a whole can be made to operate coherently (i.e., each individual VCSEL is coherent with the others), and in phase, the on-axis power in the far field is N^2P and the width of the radiation pattern is reduced by $\sim 1/N$ (compared to an incoherent array). This high on-axis far field power is required in laser applications such as free-space optical communications and laser radar where a large amount of power is required at a distance, or in applications such as laser welding, laser machining, and optical fiber coupling that require high power focused to a small spot.

The monolithic power combining approach described in the present application brings the proven technological and economic benefits demonstrated by combining transistors, capacitors, and resistors into large scale integrated circuits to integrated photonic circuits consisting of lasers, optical waveguides, and grating couplers. Presently, the cost of high power (500 to 1000 W) Nd:YAG and CO₂ lasers exceeds \$100/Watt. Coherent VCSEL arrays can reduce this cost by one or two orders of magnitude. The cost advantage of VCSELs has been realized in local area network (LAN) markets where low power (<0.005W) VCSEL based transceivers selling for about \$100 dominate the market, having displaced more expensive edge emitting devices.

Other applications, such as optical pumps at 980 nm for erbium doped amplifying telecomm fibers will benefit from low cost lasers with increased power (0.05 W to 1 W). Such powers cannot be achieved with individual VCSELs but could easily be achieved with small VCSEL arrays. Aside from these commercial and economic applications, coherent arrays of

VCSELs have far-reaching significance because they have the potential to deliver very high power ($>>1$ W) over a wide variety of wavelengths. Such a tool is certain to accelerate progress in medicine, communications, manufacturing, and national defense.

High-Power Coherent Array of VCSELs

The present application discloses an array of VCSELs which demonstrate coherent operation with respect to one another. In a preferred embodiment, coherent operation is obtained by using a waveguide which optically couples the lasers of the array. The waveguide couples the lasers with a periodic grating structure formed to capture a small part of the light from an individual laser, removing it from that laser's cavity, while also adding light to that laser's cavity from other lasers of the array. Thus the common waveguide both removes light from and adds light to each laser in the array, transferring enough optical power in the coupling exchange for phase locking to occur.

In one preferred embodiment, the common waveguide is located outside the monolithic VCSEL array, not being fabricated on the same wafer. In another preferred embodiment, the common waveguide is fabricated on the wafer with the VCSELs, and is located outside the cavity of the lasers, above them on the wafer structure. This approach avoids introducing complexity and losses into the individual VCSEL structure. In another preferred embodiment, the common waveguide is fabricated within the cavity, between the two reflectors of the VCSEL structure.

Advantages of the disclosed methods and structures, in various embodiments, can include one or more of the following:

- 1- provides a precise, controlled amount of coupling between array elements, independent of the element size and spacing;
- 2- can include phase adjustors to assist in beam formation and electronic beam steering (the phase adjustors can be a VCSEL element operating at below lasing threshold, where variations in current correspond to significant changes in the effective index of refraction in the gain region, and therefore the effective optical length of the corresponding waveguide segment).

BRIEF DESCRIPTION OF THE DRAWINGS

The disclosed inventions will be described with reference to the accompanying drawings, which show important sample embodiments of the invention and which are incorporated in the specification hereof by reference, wherein:

Figure 1 shows a VCSEL consistent with a preferred embodiment.

Figure 2a shows one embodiment of the present innovations.

Figure 2b shows a detail of the waveguide and grating from **Figure 2a**.

Figure 3 shows another embodiment of the present innovations.

Figure 4a shows another embodiment of the present innovations.

Figure 4b shows a detail of the waveguide and grating from **Figure 4a**.

Figure 5 shows a two dimensional array of VCSEL elements according to a preferred embodiment.

DETAILED DESCRIPTION OF THE PREFERRED EMBODIMENT

The numerous innovative teachings of the present application will be described with particular reference to the presently preferred embodiment. However, it should be understood that this class of embodiments provides only a few examples of the many advantageous uses of the innovative teachings herein. In general, statements made in the specification of the present application do not necessarily delimit any of the various claimed inventions. Moreover, some statements may apply to some inventive features but not to others.

Figure 1 shows an individual VCSEL laser consistent with the innovations herein disclosed. The device is a small optical oscillator and is fabricated on a semiconductor wafer. Each laser comprises a vertical stack of components. Two DBR mirrors 102 are used, one at either end of the laser cavity, and an active region 104 is located between the reflectors. The active region, or gain region, is made up of one or more quantum wells separated by barrier layers. When current is injected into the device, electrons and holes recombine in the gain region, producing photons 106. These photons reflect off the DBRs at either end, providing feedback and causing the device to lase. The top mirror is partially transparent and allows light to escape through the surface of the device.

The DBRs are formed by patterning and etching the surface according to the necessary period and dimensions of the reflectors. The active region is formed with quantum wells, preferably using selective growth of epitaxial silicon.

Figure 2a shows a first embodiment of the present innovations. It comprises a linear array of VCSEL 202 devices formed on the same substrate. In this example, viewed from the side, four VCSELs are shown on a single substrate. Each VCSEL of course emits coherent light, but the different VCSELs are not a priori coherent with respect to one another because their phases and frequencies will differ slightly.

A waveguide 204 is shown above the VCSEL structures. In this embodiment, the waveguide is not integrated with the VCSELs, being fabricated separate from the wafer. In the preferred embodiment, the waveguide is made from epitaxial silicon. Other materials can be used for the waveguide, such as an optical polymer, for example. The waveguide has a grating 206 with the period necessary to couple light into and out of the VCSELs. This grating period is calculated from $\Lambda = \lambda_0 / n_{eff}$, where λ_0 is the free space wavelength of the light and n_{eff} is the effective index of refraction for the coupling waveguide.

The figure shows the light that is emitted by the VCSELs and which passes through the waveguide with a thick solid arrow. This light is emitted perpendicularly from the surface of the VCSELs. The figure also shows the light passing to and from the VCSELs and the waveguide, denoted by smaller arrows.

Figure 2b shows a detailed view of the waveguide and grating structure. A DBR from the VCSEL allows light (P_{inc}) to transmit through, which is incident on the waveguide. Some of this light reflects back into the VCSEL (P_{ref}), while some enters the waveguide and stays there, propagating left (P_{left}) and right (P_{right}) to other VCSEL elements. Likewise, light from the other VCSEL elements which is already in the waveguide is outcoupled from the waveguide and enters the VCSEL as P_{oc} . Finally, light that transmits through the waveguide and is emitted at the surface of the device (P_{trans}) is shown by a large arrow.

Figure 3 shows another embodiment of the present innovations. A linear array of VCSELs 302 is formed on a semiconductor substrate 304. The VCSELs each comprise a set of DBR mirrors to provide feedback in the cavity from photons emitted by electron hole recombination in the pumped active area. One DBR is slightly transmissive to allow light to escape the cavity and be emitted out the top of the device. Integrated on this same wafer is a common waveguide that couples light to and from all the VCSEL elements. This design integrates the coupling waveguide 306 above the VCSELs. The waveguide will intercept photons in this region, coupling a fraction (about one percent in a sample embodiment) of the single pass optical power incident on the waveguide out of the laser cavity, enough to allow phase-locking to occur. The same amount of power is also coupled from the waveguide into each VCSEL in the array, providing enough coupling exchange to phase lock the different VCSELs of the array, making them operate coherently with respect to one another. The degree of coupling can be controlled to achieve whatever amount is necessary to get coherent outputs.

This innovative approach avoids introducing complexity and losses into the basic VCSEL elements, and allows testing the VCSEL elements on a portion of the wafer before the waveguide is fabricated. The coupling waveguide (preferably formed of similar epitaxial material to that of the VCSEL layers, but possibly formed from other materials such as an optical polymer) will have the appropriate composition to guide light. The waveguide layer will have a grating at or near the core region of the waveguide. The grating may be formed holographically or by other common means such as direct electron beam writing or by phase-shift masks into a recording medium and then etched into the exposed surface. The grating period Lambda required to couple light into the VCSEL elements is typically about 0.25 microns for light of wavelength 0.85 microns.

The waveguide shown in the figure can have the grating 308 formed on the bottom (buried), or on the top surface of the device. This latter configuration is preferred in that it allows the growth of the waveguide (preferably epi) to be done before the grating is formed, making a good epi layer easier to grow. The grating is then etched on top of the device.

Figure 4a shows another embodiment of the present innovations. In this example, a linear array of VCSEL lasers 402 is seen from a side view. The lasers are formed on a semiconductor substrate 404, and comprise a set of DBR mirrors and an active area, as in previously discussed examples. (Of course, it is noted that other kinds of reflectors can be used consistent with the herein disclosed ideas, and the present application is not limited to the exact examples mentioned here.)

In this variation, the waveguide 406 is integrated on the same wafer as the lasers and fabricated during the process. The coupling waveguide structure is integrated between the two DBR mirrors of this example, and is preferably made from epitaxial material, such as AlGaAs/AlAs/GaAs with AlGaAs, InGaAs, or AlInGaAs for the quantum well(s) if the emission wavelengths are in the range of about 800 nm to 1000 nm. For emission at other wavelengths, such as 630 to 680 nm (red light), the AlGaInP/GaAs material system can be used. For longer telecommunication wavelengths, InGaAsP/InP or AlGaInAs/InP can be used, although more exotic compounds may also work. (The figure shows the waveguide positioned above the active region, but it could also be below this region.)

The waveguide will intercept photons in this region, coupling a (generally small) fraction of the single pass optical power incident on the waveguide out of the laser cavity. The same amount of power is also coupled from the waveguide into each VCSEL in the array, providing enough coupling exchange to phase lock the different VCSELs of the array, making them operate coherently with respect to one another.

Figure 4b shows a close up of the waveguide from **Figure 4a**. Light reflected from the DBR is incident on the waveguide's grating, P_{inc} . Some of this light couples to the waveguide and propagates therein as P_{right} and P_{left} , headed to other VCSEL elements. Likewise, light from other VCSEL elements is outcoupled P_{oc} to the VCSEL shown in the figure. This exchange of light allows phase locking of the devices. The remainder of the light transmits through the waveguide as P_{trans} , which oscillates within the cavity for another pass. Light is emitted from the device through the top surface of the DBR.

To fabricate this structure, the first DBR mirror, active region, and the part of the coupling waveguide up to the grating surface are grown. The grating is then fabricated, the

remainder of the VCSEL structure is then grown, and the n- and p- sides are metallized.

Testing usually consists of measuring the light-current (L-I) curves, far-field, near-fields, and spectra of the devices. The last three measurements mentioned, taken together, indicate the degree of phase-locking and coherence of the array. Other means of testing the lasers include leaving some lasers uncoupled on the wafer while connecting the rest with the common waveguide. The uncoupled lasers can then be more easily tested. Light from the lasers can also be tested by adding a sacrificial layer to the waveguide which spoils the necessary index of refraction conditions for internal reflection, allowing light to escape, which can then be tested. After testing, the sacrificial layer is then removed, restoring the internal reflection properties of the waveguide.

In previous examples, one-dimensional arrays of elements have been used as an example of the innovative VCSEL system. The idea can also be extended to a two-dimensional array with the integration of total internal reflection corner turning mirrors as indicated in **Figure 5**. Of course, other reflectors may be used, such as external prism couplers. Coherent single frequency two-dimensional serpentine and ring laser arrays have been demonstrated with both corner turning techniques. (See "Surface Emitting Semiconducting Lasers and Arrays," Ed. Gary Evans and Jacob Hammer, Academic Press, 1993, which is hereby incorporated by reference.)

Figure 5 shows a two-dimensional VCSEL array according to a preferred embodiment. In this example, a 4x4 ring VCSEL array, having 16 elements, is seen from the top view. The VCSELs 502 are arranged in rows with the waveguide 504 connecting different elements in a row. Different rows are optically connected using corner turning mirrors 506 in this example.

Phase adjustors 508 can be added to the system to assist in beam forming and electronic beam steering. In one possible implementation of this idea, the phase adjustors are added between the VCSEL elements on the waveguide, one for each element preferably. The phase adjustors can be other VCSEL elements operated below threshold, where changes in applied current correspond to a change in effective index of refraction, for example. Alternatively, phase adjustment can be implemented with a series of micro-electrical-mechanical (MEM) metal fingers of which one or more are brought into contact with a section of the waveguide. The metal finger in contact with the dielectric waveguide changes the propagation constant and therefore the phase of the light. By varying phase with such systems, the emitted light from the VCSELs can be electronically steered and shaped. Phase adjustors can be used to control the shape of the output beam or to direct the total beam in a direction as desired, as in phased array radar antenna steering. A possible location for the phase adjustors is indicated in **Figure 5**.

Definitions:

Following are short definitions of the usual meanings of some of the technical terms which are used in the present application. (However, those of ordinary skill will recognize whether the context requires a different meaning.) Additional definitions can be found in the standard technical dictionaries and journals.

VCSEL: vertical cavity surface emitting laser.

DBR: distributed Bragg reflector.

Modifications and Variations

As will be recognized by those skilled in the art, the innovative concepts described in the present application can be modified and varied over a tremendous range of applications, and accordingly the scope of patented subject matter is not limited by any of the specific exemplary teachings given, but is only defined by the issued claims.

For example, the specific materials mentioned in the present application are not the only possible ones consistent with the innovations herein disclosed. The scope of the ideas apply to new semiconductor and other materials which may become available.

CLAIMS

1. An solid state photonics system, comprising:
an array of vertical cavity surface emitting lasers;
a common waveguide connected to couple light from individual lasers to other individual lasers in said array such that all lasers of said array operate coherently with respect to one another.
2. The system of Claim 1, wherein said waveguide is positioned above said array such that light passing through one reflector of each laser of said array and enters said waveguide.
3. The system of Claim 1, wherein said waveguide intersects the cavity of each laser of said array.
4. The system of Claim 1, wherein said waveguide is formed of epitaxial material.
5. The system of Claim 1, wherein said waveguide is formed on the surface of said device and is made of an optical polymer.
6. An solid state photonics system, comprising:
a plurality of vertical cavity surface emitting lasers coupled to exchange photons from one another through a common waveguide, said lasers and waveguide fabricated on a common wafer.
7. The integrated circuit of Claim 6, wherein said waveguide intersects the cavity of each laser of said array.
8. The integrated circuit of Claim 6, further comprising phase adjustors connected to said waveguide and positioned to modify the phase of light from said lasers.
9. The integrated circuit of Claim 8, wherein said phase adjustors are used to control the light emitted from said system.

10. The integrated circuit of Claim 6, wherein said lasers operate coherently with respect to one another.
11. An solid state photonics system, comprising:
an array of vertical cavity surface emitting lasers;
a waveguide connected to couple light between said lasers such that substantially the same amount of light coupled from a first laser of said array is coupled to said first laser from said waveguide;
wherein said waveguide comprises periodic gratings which couple light into and out of said lasers such that said lasers operate coherently with respect to one another.
12. The system of Claim 11, wherein said waveguide optically connects to each laser of said system between the reflectors of each said lasers.
13. The system of Claim 11, further comprising phase adjustors integrated with said waveguide.
14. The system of Claim 11, wherein said waveguide optically connects to each of said lasers outside the cavity of said lasers.
15. A solid state photonics system, comprising:
coherently coupling a plurality of vertical cavity surface emitting lasers using a common waveguide, said waveguide having periodic gratings which couple light into and out of said lasers.
16. The system of Claim 15, wherein phase adjustors are used to steer the beam emitted from said system.
17. The system of Claim 15, wherein said waveguide is formed from epitaxial material.

18. A vertical cavity surface emitting laser system, comprising:
 - a plurality of vertical cavity lasers, each laser comprising a reflector, a gain region, and another reflector in a stack;
 - a waveguide optically connected to each said laser, said waveguide being fabricated on the same wafer as said lasers;
 - wherein said waveguide allows exchange of photons between said lasers such that said lasers operate coherently with respect to one another.
19. The method of Claim 18, wherein said waveguide optically connects to said lasers at a location above said gain region and below one of said reflectors.
20. The method of Claim 18, wherein said waveguide optically connects to said lasers at a location above one of said reflectors and below said gain region.
21. The method of Claim 18, wherein said waveguide is fabricated on top of said lasers, and wherein said waveguide includes gratings to couple light to and from said lasers.
22. A fabrication method, comprising the steps of:
 - providing a substrate
 - forming a first plurality of reflectors in said substrate;
 - forming a plurality of gain regions on said substrate, said gain regions each being vertically aligned with one of said first plurality of reflectors;
 - forming a second plurality of reflectors, each reflector of said second plurality being vertically aligned with one of said gain regions, and wherein said first plurality of reflectors, said plurality of gain regions, and said second plurality of reflectors form a plurality of vertical cavity surface emitting lasers;
 - forming a waveguide structure which is optically connected to at least two or more of said lasers;
 - wherein said waveguide allows exchange of photons between said lasers such that said lasers operate coherently with respect to one another.

23. A fabrication method, comprising the steps of:
 - providing a substrate;
 - forming a first plurality of reflectors in said substrate;
 - forming a plurality of gain regions on said substrate, said gain regions each being vertically aligned with one of said first plurality of reflectors;
 - forming a waveguide structure over said gain regions, said waveguide having a plurality of coupling gratings each of which is vertically aligned with one of said gain regions;
 - forming a second plurality of reflectors, each reflector of said second plurality being vertically aligned with one of said gain regions, and wherein said first plurality of reflectors, said plurality of gain regions, and said second plurality of reflectors form a plurality of vertical cavity surface emitting lasers;
 - wherein said waveguide allows exchange of photons between said lasers such that said lasers operate coherently with respect to one another.

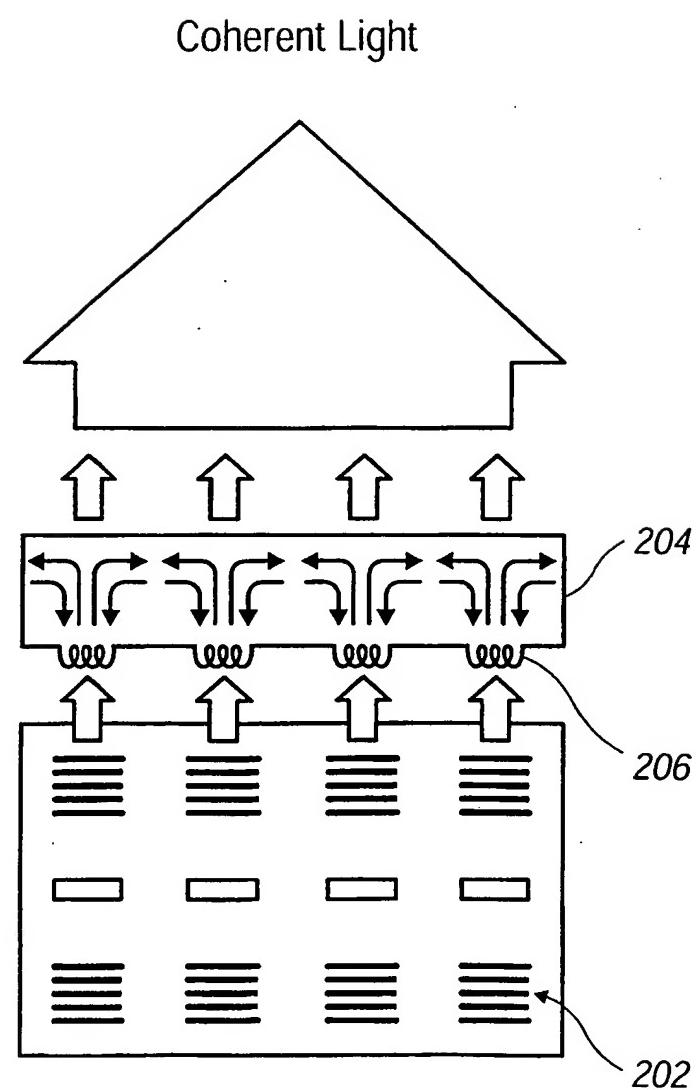
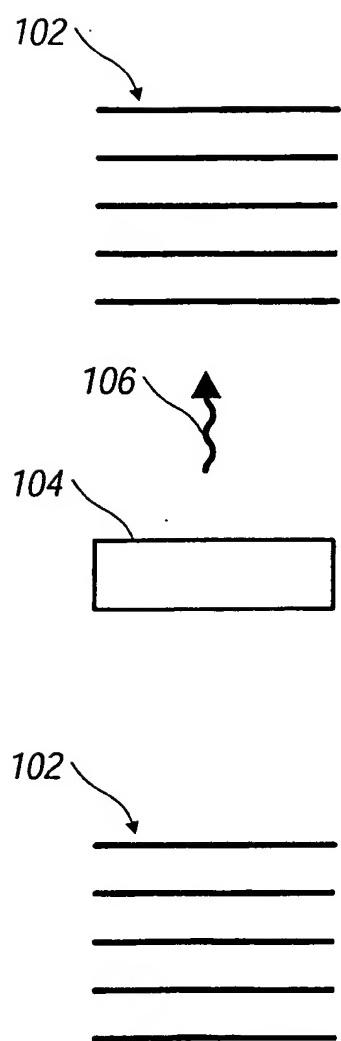


FIG. 1 : VCSEL

FIG. 2a

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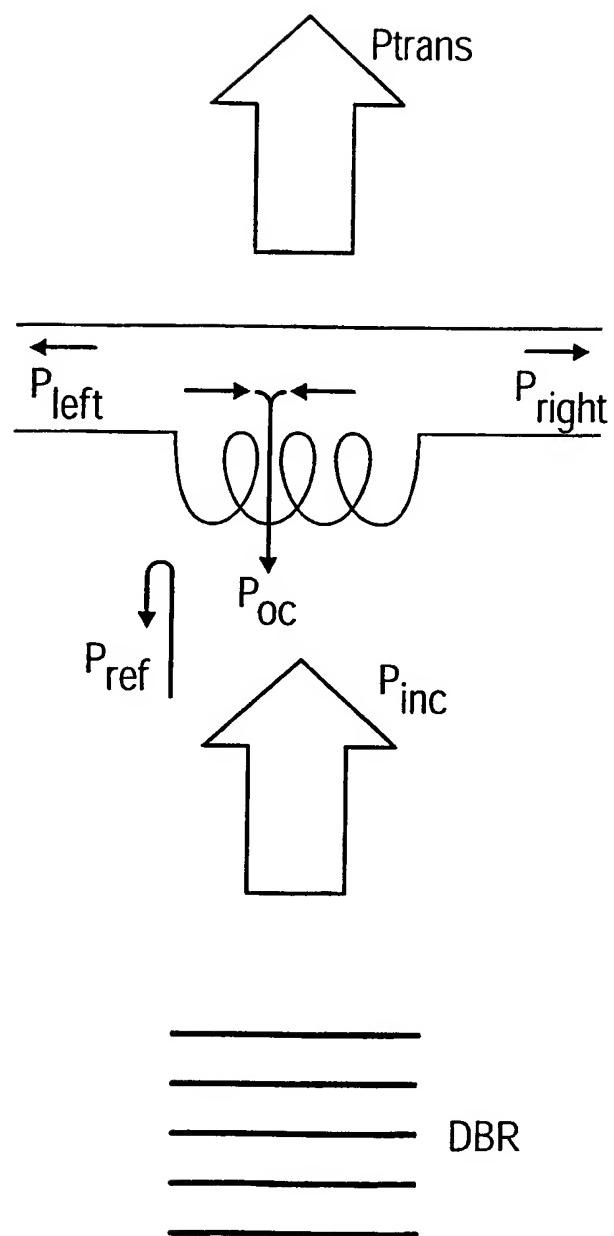


FIG. 2b

Coherent Light

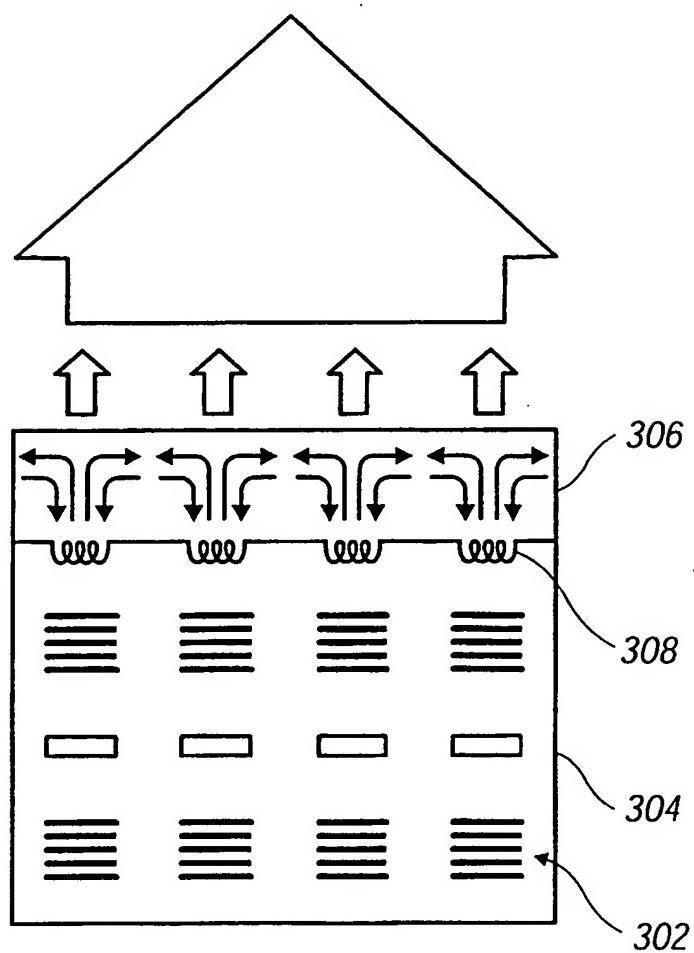


FIG. 3

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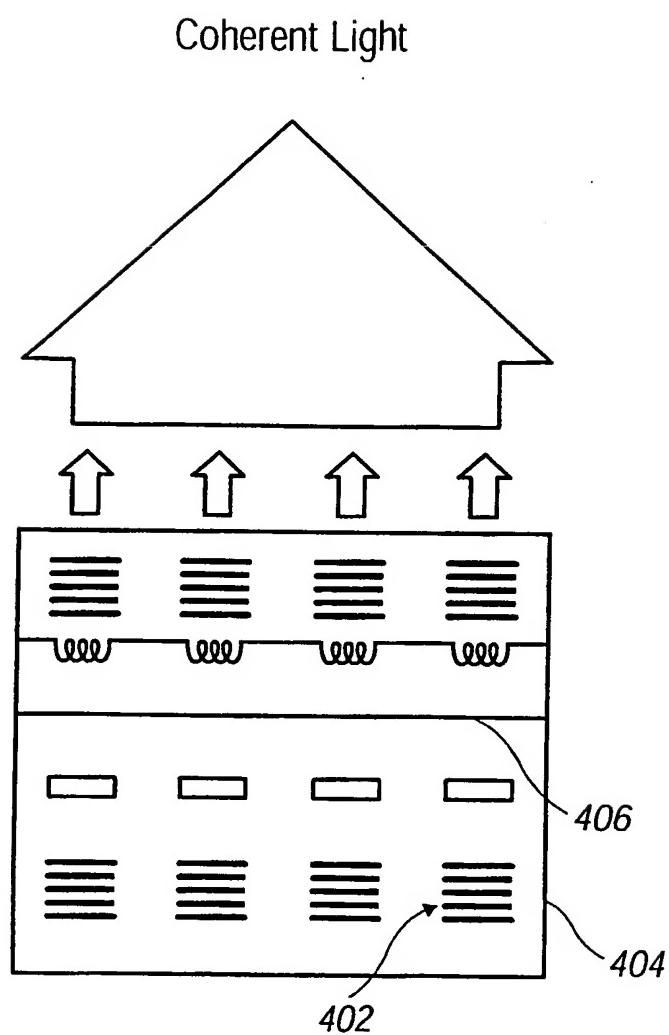


FIG. 4a

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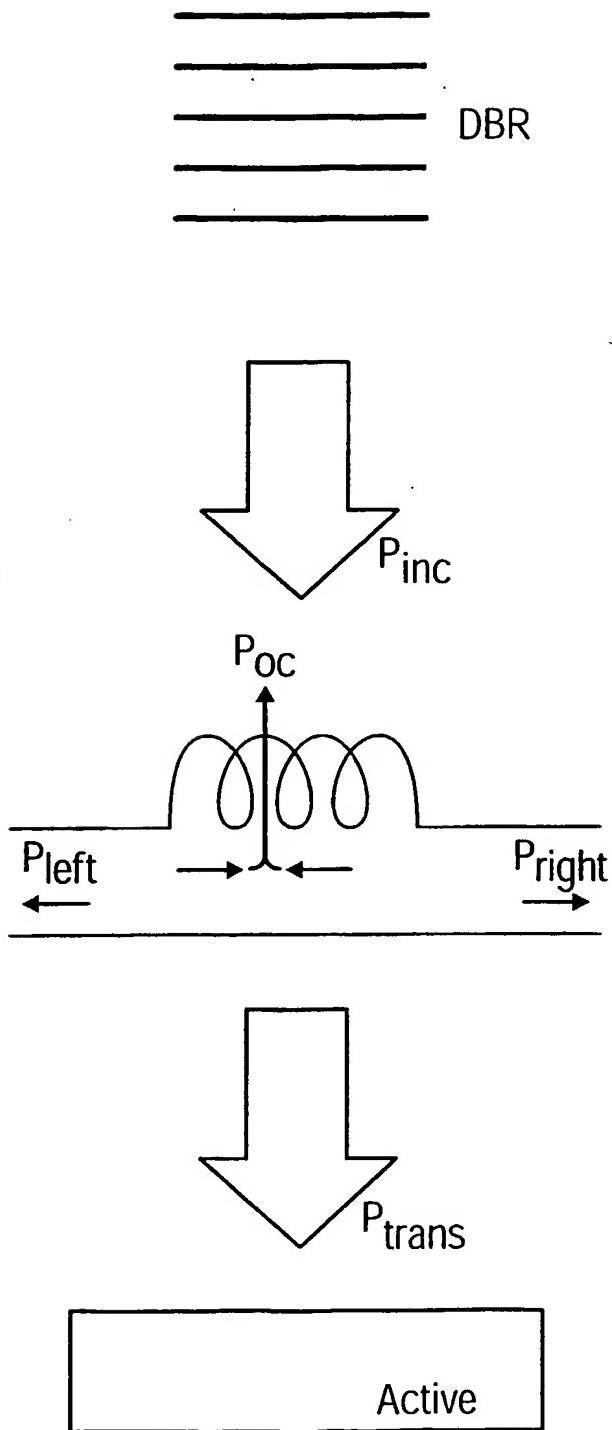


FIG. 4b

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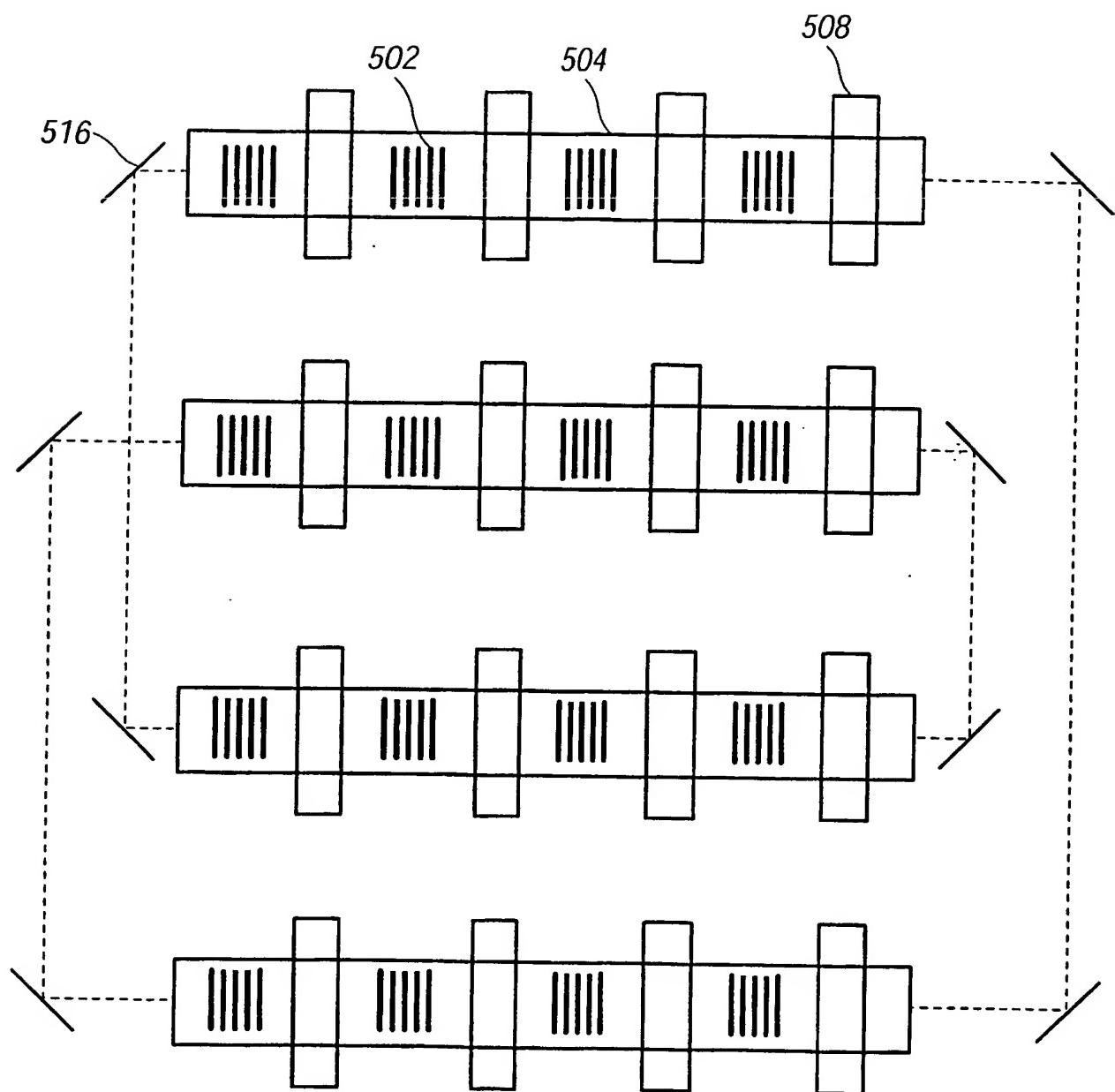


FIG. 5

INTERNATIONAL SEARCH REPORT

International application No.

PCT/US02/13409

A. CLASSIFICATION OF SUBJECT MATTER

IPC(7) : H01S 5/00
US CL : 372/50, 92, 96

According to International Patent Classification (IPC) or to both national classification and IPC

B. FIELDS SEARCHED

Minimum documentation searched (classification system followed by classification symbols)
U.S. : 372/50, 92, 96

Documentation searched other than minimum documentation to the extent that such documents are included in the fields searched

Electronic data base consulted during the international search (name of data base and, where practicable, search terms used)
Please See Continuation Sheet

C. DOCUMENTS CONSIDERED TO BE RELEVANT

Category *	Citation of document, with indication, where appropriate, of the relevant passages	Relevant to claim No.
A	US 5,970,081 A (Hirayama et al) 19 October 1999 (19.10.1999), entire document.	-----

Further documents are listed in the continuation of Box C.

See patent family annex.

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Date of the actual completion of the international search

20 July 2002 (20.07.2002)

Date of mailing of the international search report

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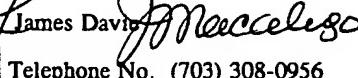
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INTERNATIONAL SEARCH REPORT

International application No.

PCT/US02/13409

Continuation of B. FIELDS SEARCHED Item 3:

APS (EAST)

search terms: photonics adj system, array and VCSEL